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Follow-up to the commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade

Programme of educational outreach on the transatlantic slave trade and slavery

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolution 64/15, in which the Secretary-General was requested to report on continued action to implement the programme of educational outreach on the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, as well as steps to enhance world public awareness of the commemorative activities and the permanent memorial initiative.

During the year, the Department of Public Information reinforced efforts to maintain the effective implementation of its multiplatform outreach programme, established in 2008 to improve understanding and appreciation of the history and impact of the 400-year-long slave trade. In that regard, it continued to raise awareness about related issues through public information campaigns and by promoting and facilitating knowledge-sharing initiatives, in particular studies and expert discussions on the topic.

The Department collaborated with States Members of the Caribbean Community and the African Union to organize the third annual observance of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade on 25 March. The theme, "Expressing our freedom through culture", underlined the significance of the cultural heritage of enslaved peoples in their fight for survival and freedom. Weeklong commemorative activities held at Headquarters included a cultural evening celebrating Afro-Caribbean music and food, the screening of a documentary film, a panel discussion, an international student videoconference and a special commemorative meeting of the General Assembly.

Through its network of information centres and other news and media outreach resources, the Department of Public Information carried the message of the observance internationally and maintained follow-up awareness-raising activities to emphasize the need to continue to educate future generations about the slave trade.

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I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, by its resolution 62/122, designated 25 March the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

2. In the same resolution, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to collaborate with and build on the work of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), including its Slave Route Project, to establish a programme of educational outreach to inculcate future generations with the causes, consequences and lessons of the slave trade and to communicate the dangers of racism and prejudice.

3. By its follow-up resolution 64/15, the General Assembly further requested the Secretary-General to report on continued action to implement the outreach programme and steps to enhance world public awareness of the commemorative activities and the permanent memorial initiative.

4. The present report is submitted pursuant to those requests.

II. Background

5. During its 400-year duration, the transatlantic slave trade, one of the most tragic developments in human history, uprooted 25 to 30 million Africans by UNESCO's estimation. It resulted in the death of millions, left physical and mental scars on the survivors and created far-reaching social, political, economic and cultural legacies that continue to be felt today in numerous societies in Africa, the Caribbean, North and South America and Europe.

6. Perhaps owing to the methods and nature of the slave trade, efforts by the international community to study, understand and interpret issues relating to its causes and consequences had been patchy, creating gaps in the general body of knowledge about a subject addressed by major instruments of international law. The need to address it comprehensively and to better understand all its aspects, and the lessons to be learned, have become increasingly important in the face of contemporary forms of slavery and human trafficking.

7. One of the least understood aspects of the slave trade related to the methods and strategy adopted by enslaved peoples in their numerous attempts to fight back. Historical records, including archival information, reveal that one of the most important factors which facilitated their efforts in that regard were the similarities in their cultures, which made it easy for them to understand each other, while their captors could not.

8. The 2010 commemoration, held under the theme "Expressing our freedom through culture", acknowledged the perseverance of that cultural element in the enslaved peoples' struggle for survival.

III. A cultural legacy

9. The theme of the 2010 commemoration underlines the continuing and central relevance of cultural heritage, passed down from generation to generation as a

medium for asserting identity by the millions of descendants of former slaves. In many instances, the simultaneous assimilation of other cultures in the diaspora resulted in the development of distinct cultures, which we recognize today as the cultural legacy of the slave trade, made possible by the determination of enslaved peoples to preserve the core of their identity.

10. Against that background, the 2010 commemoration was both a remembrance and a celebration. As a remembrance, it provided a solemn occasion for a collective reflection on the injustice of the slave trade, and an opportunity for honouring the victims and for ensuring that the necessary lessons continue to be learned. As a celebration, it provided an opportunity to appreciate the spiritual strength and determination of enslaved peoples and their descendants, who prevailed in preserving their cultural identities in their struggle to survive the brutal system of slavery. In the process, they created new cultures and positive legacies.

11. The 2010 commemoration as a whole was dedicated to Haiti, in recognition of its significance in the struggle against slavery and as a special tribute following the earthquake which devastated the country on 12 January 2010. The dedication especially acknowledged the inspiration which the anti-slavery movement gained from Haiti's successful rebellion (1791-1804) against the slave trade system (the revolution of Saint-Domingue), which resulted in the liberation of modern-day Haiti as the first independent country in Latin America and the Caribbean. The dedication also helped to focus timely attention on the need for the international community to rally and help to rebuild Haiti following the earthquake.

IV. Activities

Afro-Caribbean music and food fair: an expression of freedom through culture

12. Weeklong activities organized to mark the 2010 commemoration, and all designed to reflect the theme, began on 22 March with a cultural evening celebrating Afro-Caribbean cuisine, music and dress, which are the most visible and dynamic aspects of the culture, both in Africa and the diaspora. Guests were treated to an array of sumptuous platters prepared by Cameroon and members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). The dishes served incorporated common elements of traditional and ceremonial dining in African and Caribbean countries.

13. The musical accompaniment to the cultural evening was provided by an African musician who played the kora, a string instrument popular in many West African countries; the United Nations Jazz Society, which performed a repertoire echoing African and Caribbean influence on the improvisation at the heart of jazz music; and the Golden Harp Steel Orchestra, whose colourful style of steel pan music eloquently illustrated the cultural resilience of former slaves in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1880s, who resorted to making music with old metal cans and pieces after they were forbidden from drumming by their captors. As was underlined at the cultural evening by the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, culture was, indeed, one of the most poignant and powerful ways in which slaves and their descendants overcame some of the cruel legacies of slavery.

Documentary film screening

14. Also marking the commemoration was the screening on 23 March of the documentary film *Slave routes: resistance, abolition and creative progress*, which captured discussions and performances during a symposium on the same topic held in 2008 by the Institute of African-American Affairs of New York University to mark the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. The 100-minute-long documentary addressed the persisting knowledge gap about aspects of the transatlantic slave trade, including the full geographic scale of its impact, the human losses to Africa, the number of casualties during the ill-fated middle passage, the impact of deportation in some instances and the role of the slave trade in the economic and industrial development of the participating countries.

15. The screening, attended by the representatives of Member States, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society organizations, provided a rare opportunity for attendees to hear the recorded discussion of those issues by more than 90 experts. Also in attendance were staff members and guests from the Institute of African-American Affairs, where the documentary was made, as well as the director of the documentary, Jayne Cortez, whose remarks at the screening drew the attention of the audience to the need for greater awareness and knowledge about many aspects of the slave trade.

Three-part exhibition

16. On 24 March an exhibition entitled "400 years of struggle for freedom and culture" opened as a major commemorative activity at United Nations Headquarters. The exhibition, which ran until the end of April, comprised three components, of which the first, entitled "*Amistad*: a true story of freedom", depicted various stages of the slave revolt of 1839 aboard the slave ship *Amistad*. The second component, "African Resistance", highlighted through a slide show of digital images the efforts of Africans to combat the transatlantic slave trade, while the third element, "The Haitian Inspiration", which underlined the dedication of the observance to Haiti, comprised paintings and pictures commemorating the Haitian revolution and other forms of resistance to slavery.

Panel discussion

17. The official Day of Remembrance, 25 March, was marked with a number of activities, including an NGO panel discussion on the theme "The impact of cultural expression as a means of resistance to the transatlantic slave trade". Approximately 140 participants heard two panellists who are experts on the subject, Sekkou Konneh, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Liberia, and Marcia Burrowes, Coordinator and Lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados. There was agreement between them that the use of language, religion, songs and other oral traditions, music and dance were key to the ability of enslaved peoples to successfully maintain their cultures.

18. Both panellists highlighted interesting examples of the ways in which the enslaved also adapted their culture to include elements of the enslavers' traditions, blending native languages with European tongues to "creolize" both cultures. Similarly, enslaved peoples who were forced to adopt European religions combined their newly acquired faith with elements of their original traditional beliefs, thereby creating syncretic religions. The panellists pointed out that those various cultural

expressions enabled enslaved peoples to establish a sense of shared community transcending continental borders, and to relive and recreate their traditions.

Special media briefing on the permanent memorial

19. Also on the official Day of Remembrance, a media event was held to brief journalists on progress regarding the permanent memorial being built at the initiative of CARICOM and with the support of the African Union and other Member States. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 62/122, the memorial, when completed, will be erected on United Nations premises in acknowledgement of the tragedy and in consideration of the legacy of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Jamaica, leading efforts to erect the memorial, informed the media that a committee of interested States (Permanent Memorial Committee) had been established to oversee the project, with CARICOM and African Union member States playing a primary role. The Department organized on the same day an interview with United Nations Radio, which gave CARICOM and African Union representatives a prime-time opportunity to promote the project.

Special commemorative meeting of the General Assembly

20. The most notable activity held on the official Day of Remembrance was a solemn commemorative meeting of the General Assembly. The Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information delivered a message from the Secretary-General, in which he declared slavery an abhorrent practice and urged the creation of a climate in which such cruelty was inconceivable, by honouring the victims, remembering past injustices and ensuring that such systematic abuse of human rights was never repeated. That message was echoed by the keynote speaker, Tony Bogues, Professor of Africana Studies at Brown University; by Christopher Hacket (Barbados), who spoke on behalf of the President of the General Assembly; and by representatives of regional groups and other Member States.

21. The special Assembly meeting also featured artistic performances facilitated by the Department of Public Information and designed to illustrate the solemn nature of the occasion. They included an artistic interpretation of the abominable practice of lynching, to which many former slaves and their early descendants were subjected in parts of the United States; a reading of excerpts from the autobiography of the ex-slave Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa the African, who experienced slavery and the horrors of the middle passage as an 11-year-old; and a riveting a cappella performance by Kaïssa, a celebrated Cameroonian singer, who drew attention to this year's theme with an introspective song advocating positive change in aspects of traditional and cultural practices pertaining to women in some African societies, in order to guarantee an even greater expression of collective freedom.

International student videoconference

22. The week of commemorative activities concluded on 26 March with a videoconference for middle and high school students, which discussed the theme of the commemoration, "Expressing our freedom through culture". The event featured students and teachers from four continents and in schools participating in the UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network (ASPnet). Approximately 500 of them gathered at United Nations Headquarters, where they were linked by

videoconference facilities to their counterparts in seven countries (Cuba, Gambia, Ghana, Jamaica, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago and United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).

23. The Department of Public Information prepared a comprehensive study guide to ensure that the students came prepared for the lively and interactive event, during which they made presentations, including songs, dances, poems and readings. After each presentation, they were given an opportunity to ask questions and seek different perspectives on the slave trade. Two large video screens were provided to enable participants in New York to see a close-up of their counterparts in other participating countries, and the entire event was webcast on the Internet (www.cyberschoolbus.com), which enabled schools other than those participating via teleconference to follow the proceedings and submit questions in real time. The videoconference was moderated by the cultural anthropologist and Executive Director of Afrodiaspora, Inc., Sheila Walker.

V. Partnerships with Member States and other stakeholders

24. In organizing commemorative activities, the Department of Public Information worked with a Steering Committee comprising representatives from States members of CARICOM, the African Union and the United Nations Office for Partnerships, and chaired by the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. Consultations within the Committee facilitated the planning and execution of the activities held and ensured the effective participation of Member States, particularly at the special commemorative meeting of the General Assembly.

25. For the 2010 observance, the Department also forged partnerships with the Institute of African-American Affairs at New York University, which produced and provided the documentary *Slave routes: resistance, abolition and creative progress*. Collaborators in the exhibition "400 years of struggle for freedom and culture" included the Custom House Maritime Museum/New London Maritime Society, based in Connecticut, the New York-based Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the New York-based Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute.

26. The main partners for the NGO briefing on the impact of cultural expression as a means of resistance to the transatlantic slave trade were the Universities of Liberia and the West Indies, which provided panellists. UNESCO assisted to ensure the participation of many ASPnet-affiliated schools in the international student videoconference held to conclude the week of commemorative activities.

27. The commemoration also provided the Department of Public Information with the opportunity to strengthen outreach collaboration with *Amistad* America Inc., an international non-governmental organization and educational enterprise dedicated to educating students worldwide about the history of the transatlantic slave trade and its legacy. Participating in the observance for the third year, *Amistad* America drew international attention to the commemoration with an unprecedented voyage of its ship to Cuba, which traced the slave route to Havana harbour followed by the original slave ship. The arrival in Cuba of the freedom schooner *Amistad*, flying the flags of the United Nations alongside those of the United States and Cuba, helped to promote commemorative activities, especially regarding the international simulcast

for the student videoconference. Cuban students had participated in the videoconference on the deck of the freedom schooner in Havana.

VI. Information outreach and resources

28. As part of its outreach programme, the Department of Public Information established a comprehensive communication strategy to raise awareness of commemorative activities and to promote knowledge of issues relating to the slave trade, including by issuing the press releases and briefing notes to the media, briefing NGO representatives and posting related stories on iSeek, the United Nations Intranet, to keep United Nations staff informed of the programme of activities. The Department aided public accessibility to commemorative activities by facilitating the webcast of the NGO panel discussion, and of the media briefing on the permanent memorial, the student videoconference and the commemorative meeting of the General Assembly.

29. To maximize the outreach impact of the special commemorative meeting of the General Assembly, the Department took advantage of new media technology by posting on YouTube a video recording of the artistic performances during the meeting. Commemorative activities were also publicized and promoted through news and commentary on the United Nations News Centre and through the programmes of United Nations Radio in the six official languages, as well as in Kiswahili and Portuguese. In addition, the Department publicized commemorative programmes in the daily *Journal of the United Nations*.

30. Other key elements of the Department's communication outreach included the creation of a special commemorative poster, postcards and buttons providing visual interpretation of the theme. Within the context of the ongoing collaboration with the Department, the Custom House Maritime Museum/New London Maritime Society in the United States will include the commemorative posters and postcards among the materials it intends to display in a planned exhibition on the slave trade later in 2010.

31. To further promote awareness of the commemorative activities, the Department established a special website (http://www.un.org/en/events/slaveryremembranceday) dedicated to the 2010 observance with relevant information in the six United Nations official languages. The site incorporates links to reference materials, the programme of activities, background information relating in particular to the cultural resistance to the slave trade, messages from the Secretary-General and President of the General Assembly, the sites of previous commemorations and other educational materials on the slave trade.

VII. Outreach through United Nations information centres and action by civil society organizations in Member States

32. A major aspect of the outreach efforts of the Department of Public Information was undertaken through its network of United Nations information centres, services and offices worldwide, many of which organized and/or promoted commemorative activities, in some cases in collaboration with host Government entities. The range

of activities, undertaken mostly on 25 March, the official Day of Remembrance, include the following:

- Translation by many centres of the Secretary-General's message on the Day into local languages and its timely distribution to the local media, NGOs and the websites of relevant civil society entities.
- Distribution by the United Nations Information Centre in Bogota of a press release with information relating to the theme of the commemoration, "Expressing our freedom through culture", which was published in the national media.
- Interview of the Director of the United Nations Information Centre in Pretoria on the effects of the slave trade and the importance of remembering them, conducted by the Channel Africa radio, which broadcasts throughout Africa.
- Organization by the United Nations Information Centre in Rabat of educational outreach activities for high school students to mark the commemoration.
- Film screenings and related debates dedicated to the observance, organized by the United Nations Office in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in collaboration with local universities, NGOs and the media.
- Organization of a commemorative event by the United Nations Information Centre in La Paz, in collaboration with the Afro-Bolivian community there.
- Screening and distribution in Latin America and the Caribbean of the 52-minute UNESCO documentary on slave trade routes by the United Nations Information Centre in Mexico, which translated the video into Spanish with subtitles.
- Facilitation by the United Nations Information Centre in Accra of the participation of Ghanaian students at the commemorative videoconference for middle and high school students.

VIII. Future activities

33. Going forward, the Department of Public Information will further strengthen its collaboration with Member States and other stakeholders in planning and organizing activities for future remembrance observances, particularly with CARICOM and the African Union and within the framework of the Steering Committee established by the Department to facilitate the 2010 commemoration.

34. Regarding the permanent memorial initiative, the planning for which is overseen primarily by CARICOM, in close collaboration with the African Union and the United Nations Office for Partnerships, the Department of Public Information will continue to lend its support in promoting the project, by stepping up awareness-raising activities emphasizing its importance. In particular, the Department will provide advisory services on a website for the permanent memorial.

35. The Department will extend targeted educational outreach by further promoting research, studies and discussions in schools and colleges and among other entities engaged in the study of the slave trade, in order to better educate people about its causes, consequences, lessons and legacy, and to communicate the

related dangers of racism and prejudice. It will also continue to explore ways of deepening collaboration with UNESCO, including by maintaining efforts to promote and distribute educational materials relating to the UNESCO Slave Route Project.

36. The Department will also seek ways to further strengthen its partnership with *Amistad* America Inc., notably within the organization's forthcoming third international voyage to UNESCO slave route sites, which is to begin later in 2010 and last until the 2011 commemoration. Collaboration on the voyage, intended to involve calls at ports of African and Caribbean countries affected by the slave trade, will provide an additional and effective means of educational outreach to increase global awareness and promote knowledge of the history and impact of the slave trade.

37. Similarly, the Department will make concerted efforts to reinforce the partnerships forged in 2010 and during previous commemorations with academic institutions and other civil society organizations engaged in promoting the body of knowledge on the slave trade. It will explore the prospects of inviting them to co-host, headline or sponsor commemorative activities on their premises, which would serve as an innovative means of stimulating greater public interest in future observances, and of maximizing the opportunity to reach more of the target audience for the educational outreach programme on the slave trade.